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Identity Trouble and the Politics of Privilege

Commentary on Medina's "Identity Trouble"

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Jose Medina, in "Identity Trouble: Disidentification and the Problem of Difference," has made an interesting and important contribution to discussions about the nature of identity, especially the nature of oppressed identities. As it is typically formulated, the "problem of difference" in feminist theory is how to talk about woman as a coherent category having some fairly high degree of unity while at the same time recognizing and respecting the great diversity within the category. Like Wittgenstein, Medina's approach to a philosophical problem is not to solve it but to *dissolve* it. The dissolution process often involves examining our starting points and their embedded assumptions. Medina shows that difference is a problem only when we begin with a uni-dimensional logic that treats gender, race, and sex as analytically and strategically separable categories.

Using Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance to understand categories and their membership, Medina's account stresses overlapping and crisscrossing similarities

and differences as opposed to necessary and sufficient conditions. Similarities and differences are both dynamic, involving actions and behaviors. Rather than a "problem," these differences are dynamic elements in the creation and maintenance of categories of identity. Networks of differences distinguish one family from other, while other differences mark diversity within one familial identity. One of the virtues of Medina's approach is that heterogeneity rather than homogeneity is the norm. As intrinsically heterogeneous, identity categories have a built-in tension that entails that "they keep within themselves the source of their own instability, always having a process of destabilization up their sleeve, no matter how rigidly fixed they become" (657). Heterogeneity and destabilization go hand in hand.

While I understand that Medina is particularly concerned with oppressed identities, I wonder about the extension of this Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to privileged identities. In the spirit of Wittgenstein, who was always concerned with starting points, allow me to identify my own: Oppression is a systemic, structural, and institutional network of interrelated practices. Individuals are oppressed on the basis of their actual or perceived membership in groups, which makes the construction of identifiable groups one of the most important political and ethical issues facing us. Related to the concept oppression is the concept of privilege. To use Wittgenstein's expression, this is a grammatical point. To use my own, privilege is the flipside of oppression. Wherever there is oppression of certain groups, there is the privilege of other groups. Privilege, as I use the term, is the systematic conferral of unearned benefits and assets to members of dominant groups (Bailey 1998). A not uncommon phenomenon is that an individual, in virtue of her membership in various groups, can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed. And this perhaps is where interesting and productive philosophical and political challenges rest.

Here is my question in its simplest form: does Medina's familial identity work for privileged identities in the same way and as well as it does for oppressed identities? There is one consideration clearly in favor of the extension of Medina's account to privileged groups and one consideration

that gives me pause. First, in favor: Medina's account does show some of the ways that privileged identities are maintained and normalized in the context of our everyday practices rather than in meeting necessary and sufficient conditions and fixed criteria. In the same way that the heterogeneity with respect to oppressed identities results in change and fluctuation in category membership and a certain blurriness to the category's boundaries, so too in the case of privileged identities. The potential for disidentification by members of privileged groups seems greater against the heterogeneity of networks of differences and similarities than it does against a homogeneous background. Medina's account makes sense of those white people who identify as race traitors and those men who are feminists. If identities come from our actions and participation in practices, this shows the importance of acts of disloyalty to privileged identities. These acts help to create cracks and fissures in these resilient categories. So for all of these reasons, I think Medina's familial identities approach works for privilege identities. The fluctuation and instability and the blurriness of the boundaries makes this an especially interesting account of privileged identities.

The consideration that gives me pause, however, concerns the fluctuation and blurriness of boundaries, which may turn out to provide more stability to privileged identities. It seems to me that privileged identities have a rather remarkable adaptive character. There is nothing original in my saying that moving into membership in a privileged category seems to require adopting or stressing sameness and similarity. Gay marriage is a good example of this. Many of the arguments that I have heard in favor of gay marriage turn on the claims that "We really are just like you but for the fact that our partner is the same sex. We want all those benefits and assets that you get simply by being heterosexual. We want the approval because our relationships are just the same as and as good as yours." This But-For analysis does tradeoff the uni-dimensional logic: check those differences at the door and you can gain admission. But notice who is at the front of the queue and gains admission: those who most closely resemble the dominant class (Crenshaw 1991). What happens when those

newly minted members join the ranks? My guess is that those newly minted marriage card carriers will become the new defenders of marriage, marginalizing those who choose not to order their lives by making a monogamous relationship their most important identification. In this instance, it seems as if the privileged category adopts a dash of difference and heterogeneity, but it hardens into something that, as much as it can, resembles the homogeneous privileged norm. Here, heterogeneity plays a stabilizing role, as opposed to the destabilizing role it played with oppressed identities.

We are left with interesting questions about heterogeneity. What is the relationship between heterogeneity, stability, and instability within oppressive systems? Is the apparent heterogeneity of privileged groups really heterogeneity or homogeneity putting on a little drag? And perhaps most fundamental and Wittgensteinian, what do we mean/how do we use the concept of heterogeneity?

It may well be the case that the worry I have about heterogeneity and stabilization is more of a practical political worry than a philosophical one. Be that as it may, Medina's account of familial identities (with respect to both oppressed and privileged identities) and coalitions between and among them points our attention back to a pragmatic politics informed by a philosophical insight. We can make use of these familial identities as analytic and real categories without essentializing and laying down metaphysical requirements. By untangling ourselves from metaphysics and seeing how we construct these categories, we change the starting point in our philosophy and politics. We can turn our attention to our practices and actions in which these categories have their lives. This where a Wittgensteinian-inspired radical politics advanced by Medina must begin.

Medina's work is a welcome complement to *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*, both in its spirit and in its analyses. From that volume, Hilde Lindemann Nelson's and Cressida Heyes' articles combined with Medina's provide a powerful set of arguments against essentializing categories of identity. Medina's project of linking Wittgenstein and political philosophy finds common cause in the essays in *The Grammar of Politics*.

References

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